

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Gerald Hawpetoss was born in Keshena, Wisconsin in 1952. He grew up in a family that made traditional moccasins for the Menominee community. When he was eight years old, his father sent him to live with Ernest and Jane Neconish, his great-aunt and great-uncle, whom Gerald called his grandparents. His task was to learn from them, as his father had. "While there I was taught many traditions, for we are a family who inherit their traditions."

He learned traditional skills and associated knowledge from his Neconish grandparents, including hide tanning, funerary traditions, and moccasin making. Witnessing the decline in the number of people who know the old ways and associated legends, Gerald became dedicated to his craft as a way to maintain Menominee culture.

Gerald is a skilled artist, making moccasins that are both utilitarian and beautiful. He tans and smokes deer or moose hide, then cuts the leather according to paper patterns he's created and sews the leather by hand. He makes a one-piece outer moccasin and a three-piece inner layer, using white oak leaves in between. He applies sand and glue on the bottom of the outer moccasin for a hard sole. He adorns the moccasins with the flat red and green beadwork with floral designs typical of the Menominee.

In addition to moccasins, Gerald became a master of beadwork, featherwork, and traditional Menominee dance regalia, including dance bustles and roach headdresses woven from porcupine and deer tail hair. He is expert at creating the *osakapun*, a fingerwoven beadwork widow's funerary ornament. He has led several apprenticeships in those art forms.

In recognition of his extraordinary contributions and dedication to the perpetuation of Menominee cultural arts, Gerald was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1992 by the National Endowment for the Arts.

My grandmother's mother passed this art form to her and she passed it completely on to me. It's my responsibility now." - Gerald Hawpetoss